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ABSTRACT

This report, the third in the National Center for Early Development & Learning's (NCEDL) "Spotlight" series, is based on excerpts from a paper presented during a "Kindergarten Transitions" synthesis conference in early 1998. The report addresses defining readiness for school and assessing a child's readiness for school. The report notes that fundamental to the attainment of readiness skills is a sense of self that can only be developed over time and in interaction with trustworthy and caring adults. The report continues that by defining readiness as a relational, interactional construct that reflects a joint focus on the child's status and the characteristics of the educational setting, three conditions become prominent for assessing readiness: (1) opportunities for interactions between teachers and children must occur in classroom settings; (2) these interactions must take place over time, rather than on a single occasion; and (3) assessments should not be used as blunt instruments, in which one type of assessment is expected to perform the functions of others. The report recommends performance assessment, and offers several suggestions for its appropriate use. (EV)

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Assessing Readiness

How Should We Define Readiness?

No. 3 in the NCEDL Spotlight Series

September 1998

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National Center for Early Development & Learning

Spotlight No. 3 Sept. 1998

Assessing Readiness

Excerpts from a paper presented during a "Kindergarten Transitions" synthesis conference by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) in early 1998 in Charlottesville, VA. Samuel J. Meisels of the University of Michigan presented data and surveyed current literature for his paper, "Assessing Readiness." His paper is expected to be part of a book to be published later by Paul Brookes Publishing Co. Inc.

How should we define readiness?

Readiness is a process that occurs over time and in context. It is not complete by the first day of kindergarten, nor is it something that can be evaluated by a brief, simple test. It is much more than a child's knowledge of a few skills that are displayed in the first few weeks of kindergarten, or behavior patterns that are consistent with those of compliant children who have unnaturally long attention spans. Readiness is a context-dependent process that requires a period of common schooling before it can be assessed meaningfully.

Pianta and Walsh (1996) say that children are ready for school when, "for a period of several years, they have been exposed to consistent, stable adults who are emotionally invested in them; to a physical environment that is safe and predictable; to regular routines and rhythms of activity; to competent peers, and to materials that stimulate their explorations and enjoyment of the object world and from which they derive a sense of mastery."

Fundamental to the attainment of these readiness skills is a sense of self that can only be developed over time and in interaction with trustworthy and caring adults.

The characteristics that equip children to be successful in school are formed early in life. Zero to Three: The National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families (1992) suggests that these characteristics include confidence, curiosity, intentionality, self-control, relatedness, and the capacity to communicate and be cooperative. These qualities are consistent with an approach to rearing and caring for children throughout their first years of life that reflect more than a preoccupation with simply establishing a fund of general knowledge, the ability to read or recite the alphabet, familiarity with shapes, numbers, or colors, or the skills of hopping, balancing, or skipping. Such skills and knowledge are very important for young children, but they are largely made possible by the characteristics listed above.

Assessing a child's readiness for school

By defining readiness as a relational, interactional construct that reflects a joint focus on the child's status and the characteristics of the educational setting, three conditions become prominent for assessing readiness. First, opportunities for interactions between teachers and children must occur in classroom settings. Second, these interactions must take place over time, rather than on a single occasion. Third, assessments should not be used as blunt instruments, in which one type of assessment is expected to perform the functions of others.

Performance assessment is an approach to assessment that is consistent with these conditions and that provides meaningful information about children's learning and development at the outset of schooling. Curriculum-embedded performance assessments assist teachers in helping children reach their potential in early childhood

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and early elementary classrooms (see Meisels, 1997). Performance assessments are founded on the belief that learning and development can be assessed most accurately over time and in interaction with materials, peers, and other people. Teachers using performance assessments document children's actual classroom experiences and evaluate children's achievements in order to plan future educational interventions.

The conception of readiness proposed here incorporates many of the elements that contribute to a child's ability to learn, including the setting, context, and the conditions under which the child acquires skills and is encouraged to learn. Assessments of readiness must be correspondingly broad, accounting for the context in which the child learns, the opportunities the child has had to master information and acquire skills, and the achievements the child demonstrates.

All children do not have equal access to experiences that enable them to become successful learners before they enter school. Since most young children respond quickly to positive changes in their environments, assessments of readiness should occur once a child has entered a school environment and begun to interact with teachers, materials, and peers. These assessments should seek to take multiple factors into account by systematically documenting the child's learning over time and in context.

Performance assessments should

... **be integrative**, bringing together various skills into visible displays and demonstrations of behavior that occur during the context of instruction. In this paradigm, we expect to see children construct models, solve problems, and prepare reports that call upon a range of skills, experiences, and knowledge.

... **emphasize top-level competence**. Performance assessments ask children to show what they can do, and teachers are expected to work with their students to help them achieve their best possible work--work that reflects their special talents or interest.

... **encourage meta-cognition and the capacity to articulate as well as reflect on performance**. Through performance assessments, children evaluate their own work, and reflect on their own progress, rather than being passive recipients of instruction or compliant occupants of the classroom.

... **be guided by developmental standards**, embedded in the longitudinal character of children's work and captured by the continuous progress format of curriculum-embedded performance assessments. The standards also emphasize the continuity of curricular development between children at different ages, grades, and levels of functioning. (see Calfee, 1992)

For more information

Meisels, S.J. (1997) Using work sampling in authentic performance assessments. *Educational Leadership, 54*, 60-65.

Pianta, R.C. & Walsh, D.J. (1996). *High-Risk children in schools: Constructing sustaining relationships*. New York: Routledge.

Zero to Three: The National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families (1992). *Heart Start: The emotional foundations of school readiness*. Washington, DC, author.

Calfee, R. (1992). Authentic assessment of reading and writing in the elementary classroom. In M.J. Dreher & W. H. Slater (Eds.), *Elementary school literacy: Critical issues* (pp. 211-226). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

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